Overcoming the stickiness of concepts: the interplay between the barriers to theory building and creativity

Piotr Tomasz Makowski
Queen's University Belfast
Queen's Business School
Riddel Hall, 185 Stranmillis Rd, Room 02.029
Belfast BT9 5EE, United Kingdom
p.makowski@qub.ac.uk

University of Warsaw
Faculty of Management
Szturmowa 1/3, Room B514
02-678 Warsaw, Poland

Claudio Biscaro
Johannes Kepler Universität Linz
Hochschulfonds-gebäude
Altenberger Straße 69
4040 Linz, Austria
claudio.biscaro@jku.at

Acknowledgements. We want to thank Joe Mahoney, the editor of *Strategic Management Review*, and the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and guidance. We are also grateful to the audiences of the 38th *EGOS Colloquium* in Vienna, the *Philosophy of Management* 2022 Annual Conference in Oxford, UK and the *AMR/AMD Paper Development Workshop* in Warsaw (2022), where we presented earlier versions of this work.

Overcoming the stickiness of concepts:

The interplay between the barriers to theory building and creativity

ABSTRACT

Theory building is not only a set of procedures related to the statement of concepts and their relations, but also requires transferring knowledge. Concepts used to construct and develop theoretical contributions must move from the minds of authors to the minds of their audience. This social-organizational process is inherently creative but also fraught with barriers.

In this article, we propose a novel model of theory building involving a knowledge transfer process, emphasizing the dialectical interplay between the barriers to theory building and creativity. Drawing inspiration from Gabriel Szulanski's work, we submit that the process is particularly "sticky": Unless the theory is adapted to meet various criteria as it progresses through the phases of construction, it is unlikely to reach the end of the process successfully. Still, contrary to the conventional perspective on knowledge transfer, which views "stickiness" as entirely detrimental and assumes that removing barriers always facilitates theory building, we propose an alternative approach. In our model, barriers are seen as both impediments and stimuli for theory building. This dual nature of barriers requires strategic consideration, particularly when aiming to eliminate or mitigate the most harmful forms of stickiness from theory building without disregarding their potential to foster creativity.

Our integrated, knowledge transfer-based approach uncovers new strategic ground for addressing the barriers to theory building, making the process socially fluent and more rational.

INTRODUCTION

The need to know better the paths to highly creative forms of theory building is widely recognized in management and organizational research. Despite many noteworthy contributions in this area, significant barriers block creativity and innovation in building theories, which come from human, organizational, and societal conditions of advancement in theoretical knowledge. The problem of impediments to knowing is a standard theme in research on knowledge transfer (Argote and Ingram, 2000; Szulanski, 1996, 2008). However, it has not been sufficiently recognized as a challenge for theorizing and theory building. Scholarship in this area has focused on positive theory development: paths to novelty and creativity, on the one hand (Bacharach, 1989; Cornelissen and Durand, 2012; Oswick *et al*., 2011) and to diagnose the theory crisis in management research (Cronin *et al.,* 2021; Tourish, 2019) and the theory-practice gap (Parkhe, 2024; Rousseau, 2006), on the other. These streams of research indicate that barriers to theory building exist and are palpable.

The stickiness of knowledge—the barriers and imperfections in knowledge transfer—is a challenge well described in the context of organizational practice (Szulanski, 1996, 2000, 2008). Still, its analog also lives in theory building. And, considering that for strategizing and value creation, as characterized by the *theory-based view* (Felin and Zenger, 2017), building theory embodies the gist of finding original ways to allocate and recombine resources, this form of stickiness emerges as essential for strategic management. Barriers to theory building are typically related to inquiry and methodological steps needed to generate a theory (Makadok *et al*., 2018; Sætre and Ven de Ven, 2021) or build new definitions (Podsakoff *et al.,* 2016; Wacker, 2004). In our view, a more comprehensive understanding of impediments to theory building is needed, and it requires "intellectual cross-pollination" (Ilseven *et al.,*

2024) and strategic exploitation of the knowledge-transfer framework. That is, concepts need to be correctly understood to be accepted or used by those involved in the process of theory building—to travel from field to field, from theory to theory, as well as from the source to the recipient. They need to be successfully transmitted. In this social-organizational process, concepts face multi-dimensional barriers. The literature on knowledge transfer (Carlile, 2004; Szulanski, 2008), knowledge sharing (Liu *et al*., 2020a; Sergeeva and Andreeva, 2016), knowledge production (Huff, 2000; Van de Ven, 2007), and knowledge co-production (Louis and Bartunek, 1992; Parkhe, 2024) perceive barriers to knowledge transmission as negative. But is this always the case when it comes to theory building? Lessons from the literature on creativity (George, 2007; Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2017) suggest that the answer is no. Therefore, the phenomenon of barriers to theory building, which we call the stickiness of concepts, warrants systematic scientific attention. The perspective of knowledge transfer promises an entirely novel and integrated framework.

In this cross-disciplinary work, we confront the strategic implications of the knowledge transfer literature for theory building with research on creativity. Our aim is two-fold: building on Szulanski (1996, 2000, 2008) we intend to (1) map the most important predictors of the stickiness of concepts in the process of theory construction understood as involving successful knowledge transfer and (2) reveal that creativity moderates those predictors—in the sense that it affects how they come into play—in each phase of the transfer. In our view, the stickiness of concepts has an inherently ambiguous facet. Although it may block creativity and has several disadvantageous consequences for theory building (e.g., due to the insufficient absorptive capacity of recipients, and a barren theoretical context), it may also work as a catalyst: rejected ideas may gain more attractive elaboration, and imperfections

of the process of transferring novel ideas may lead authors to establish new collaborations or explore more fruitful theoretical contexts that improve their theoretical contributions. We submit that many aspects of theorizing and theory building are driven by imperfections, mistakes, and difficulties related to knowledge transfer between scholars. When creativity is in the game, barriers are not always negative. Hence the paradox: Although the stickiness of concepts appears detrimental to effective knowledge transfer, and we have important reasons to invest in removing the sources of stickiness, these are not always bad for theory building. Creativity enters the iterative interplay with stickiness in each phase of theory building. The overarching goal of our article is to reveal this interplay in more detail within the knowledge transfer perspective.

Generally, the metaphor of stickiness (introduced originally by Von Hippel (1994)) promises a few entirely novel inputs. First, it relates to innovative modeling of the theory-building process involving successful knowledge transfer—an intuitive yet promising contribution to the philosophy of science and literature on theory building. Second, its essence is to show that barriers to transfer are significantly predictable, which helps to detect and (potentially) remove the most harmful forms of stickiness. Third, although the practical importance of endeavors to remove the stickiness of concepts from the process is palpable, it is no less crucial to see its multifacetedness: stickiness remains in dialectic relation with creativity, which allows theorists to balance and exploit its negative impact productively. Overall, our modeling is an invitation to a more integrated approach to understanding the barriers to theory building, which may help avoid "balkanization"—a problem known in strategic management studies (Durand *et al.,* 2017; Schoemaker, 2024).

The article unfolds as follows. After briefly describing the fragmented knowledge of the barriers to theory building, we introduce our understanding of the stickiness of concepts within the knowledge transfer framework. In the next step, we provide a diachronic analysis of the stickiness of concepts (in the spirit of Szulanski), which allows us to define predictors of stickiness. Further, we show how creativity scholarship strengthens our diachronic analysis and will enable us to present the interplay between stickiness and creativity. We also describe how creativity emerges in each phase of theory construction and show its iterative relation to stickiness. We conclude by considering the managerial implications of the proposed approach.

BARRIERS TO THEORY BUILDING AND CREATIVITY

Examining the role of barriers in building theoretical contributions is not new (Davis, 2010; Miles and Suddaby, 2012; Pfeffer, 1993; Suddaby, 2014). Such barriers are diverse and heterogeneous and have been investigated, although often indirectly, in other research streams focusing on knowledge and its various dimensions. Recently, in strategic management, the issue of theorizing has received renewed interest, particularly through the *theory-based view*, according to which economic actors, including firms, can "pose questions, formulate problems, and craft theories that allow them to see and create novel economic possibilities" (Felin and Zenger, 2017, p.259). Furthermore, the problem of the dialectics between the stickiness of concepts (and efforts to remove it) and creativity mirrors the strategic tradeoff between efficiency and innovation—the balance between the *exploitation* of existing resources (i.e., theories) and *exploration* of new possibilities (i.e., breaking entirely new theoretical ground) (Boumgarden *et al.,* 2012). In this light, removing the barriers would amount to an exploitative approach, while giving more space for creativity in the process would mean broader investments in an explorative search. This analogy may offer practical

insights. Before we proceed, we briefly review knowledge-focused research streams to show that the problem of barriers to theory building is multifaceted and highly fragmented.

In management research on theory building, scholars often focus on two problems that can be understood in terms of investments to remove the stickiness of concepts from theory construction: diagnosis of the issues related to the standards in theorizing and positive proposals to combat imperfections (remove stickiness). Diagnoses cover an array of concerns: "too much theory" (Hambrick, 2007; Pfeffer, 2014), lack of reflexivity (Grodal *et al.,* 2021; Suddaby, 2014), and low conceptual standards (Makowski, 2021). Management research on theory crisis (Cronin *et al.,* 2021; Tourish, 2019) also belongs to this category. Efforts to improve theorizing span multiple levels and embrace various topics—macro-themes like combining lenses or merging frameworks (Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Okhuysen and Bonardi, 2011), theory borrowing (Kenworthy and Verbeke, 2015; Oswick *et al*., 2011), meso-themes focusing on imagination and metaphors (Boxenbaum and Rouleau, 2011; Cornelissen, 2005; Weick, 1989), and a variety of micro themes about clarity (Suddaby, 2010), validity (Bagozzi *et al.,* 1991; Bamberger, 2017), parsimony (Shaffer *et al.,* 2016) or conceptual amalgamation (Newman *et al.,* 2016).

Philosophy of science. Besides a historic interest in theory formation in which barriers to theory building are associated with the logic of inquiry (Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 1959), recent philosophy of science developed an interest in knowledge transfer (Carlile, 2004; Herfeld and Lisciandra, 2019), and focused on the circulation and diffusion of scientific knowledge, especially models (Herfeld, 2024; Humphreys, 2019; Lin, 2022), across disciplines. An exemplar of barriers is the transfer of behavioral psychology to economics, which faced various limitations and adjustments to "accommodate the economists' epistemic desiderata"

(Herfeld and Lisciandra, 2019, p.7). In agent-based computational social science, tensions and contradictions in internal and external processes of knowledge transmission are similarly related to the high interdisciplinarity of the field (Anzola, 2019). Overall, knowledge transfer views in philosophy reveal limitations for knowledge transmission, demonstrating greater contextual sensitivity to barriers.

The sociology of knowledge broadens the view, highlighting societal, institutional, and power-related factors affecting how knowledge is created and used (Leonardi and Barley, 2010; Swidler and Arditi, 1994). Explorations of such concepts as ignorance (Davis and Moore, 1945; Moore and Tumin, 1949) shed light on the power relations behind knowledge production (those in power can control which ideas are promoted or ignored, influencing public perceptions). Similar issues are discussed in the *sociology of science* (McGoey, 2012; Stocking, 1998), where such topics as institutional structures, communication, competition, and scientists' networks affect the transmission and the content of scientific knowledge (Ben-David and Sullivan, 1975; Phelps *et a*l., 2012), indirectly informing many facets of the stickiness of concepts. Also, recent interest in bias in peer review (Lee *et al.,* 2013) and fairness (Harrison and Lee, 2002; Nobarany and Booth, 2015) reveal other sociological problems and barriers in theory building.

Knowledge management, with its practical focus on know-how, is particularly interested in barriers to knowledge transfer (Singh and Kant, 2008; Szulanski, 1996, 2000, 2008; Szulanski *et al*., 2014) between academia and industry (de Wit-de Vries *et al.,* 2019; Fabiano *et al.,* 2020), between organizations (Easterby-Smith *et al.,* 2008; Mowery *et al.,* 1996), and within organizations (Argote *et al.,* 2000; Szulanski, 1996). Overall, this body of work views barriers to knowledge transfer as challenges to be known and possibly removed.

A related stream of work on *knowledge sharing*, an individual-level part of knowledge transfer (Tangaraja *et al*., 2016; Wang and Noe, 2010), has similar interests and specificity. However, this literature has mostly overlooked the role of internal barriers in the transfer of theoretical knowledge.

Creativity research is a field concerned with the production of useful and novel ideas within organizations (Amabile, 1983; Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2017), which typically investigates personal and interpersonal experiences leading up to these ideas (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Lingo and O'Mahony, 2010), can nevertheless inform the process of theory building. Creative ideas, like theories, need to be generated (Hanson, 1958; Simonton, 2003), elaborated and polished from incongruences and redundancies (Biscaro and Montanari, 2025; Mainemelis, 2010), and pitched to gatekeepers and evaluators (Baer, 2012; Fini *et al.,* 2023). Moreover, new ideas, like new theoretical contributions, vary in their novelty and overall 'creativity,' from mere extensions of existing theories to more radical and paradigm-shifting forms of theorizing (Biscaro *et al*., 2025; Biscaro and Comacchio, 2018; Tsoukas, 2009). Thus, the process described by creativity research closely resembles the production of theory building that leads to publication.

Research on creativity has also focused explicitly on the role of barriers (Acar *et al.,* 2019; Goncalo *et al.,* 2015)—from the phase of idea generation, where they emerge, for example, in the form of cognitive fixation (Mehta and Zhu, 2015) to the elaboration phase, where impediments may lay in the complacency of advisors or (destructive) criticism (Curhan *et al*., 2021; Mannucci and Perry-Smith, 2022). Barriers are also examined in later stages of idea generation, for instance, when creative ideas are robust enough to be pitched, e.g., in the context of metaphors and stories (Biscaro and Comacchio, 2018). Overall, two aspects

emerge: (1) barriers are higher when ideas tend to be more novel, carrying the potential of shifting existing paradigms (Cattani and Ferriani, 2008); and, despite a focus on the negative aspects of barriers, (2) there is some evidence that barriers can positively impact the creative process, fueling creators' motivation and prodding them to reach out for help (Acar *et al.,* 2019; Berrone *et al.,* 2013). However, even creativity research does not help us fully reveal how barriers relate to developing theories.

To sum up, many pictures of barriers may inform theory building. This multiplicity shows various dimensions of stickiness and ways to approach it. Those ways, however, although close to one another, do not cross. The result is a fragmented landscape lacking a genuinely integrated perspective to comprehend fully the barriers to theory building.

STICKINESS OF CONCEPTS: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF BARRIERS TO THEORY BUILDING

We maintain that the barriers to building creative, scientifically feasible, and publishable theories can be examined in one integrative framework, and it is strategically important to understand what barriers are harmful and what the role of creativity is in overcoming them. Lessons from strategic management suggest that efforts to remove barriers to increase efficiency (knowledge exploitation) and creatively seek new opportunities (knowledge exploration) need to be in balance (Boumgarden *et al.,* 2012). Acknowledging the importance of a *theory-based view* of strategy that emphasizes how novel theorizing is also at the basis of firms' competitive advantage (Felin and Zenger, 2017), we construct our framework by drawing on Szulanski's (1996, 2000, 2008) well-established thinking of stickiness, and introduce a processual knowledge transfer model between knowledge workers building theoretical contributions.

Our conjecture—*the impediments to building theoretical contributions typically have a knowledge transfer-related character*—can be analyzed with a knowledge-transfer analogous framework. Concepts, propositions, or models must meet specific methodological criteria to be accepted, used, or disseminated by theory builders. To shape *progressive* scientific practice, the transmission of theoretical contributions from the source to the recipient (which often implies their traveling from field to field, from one theoretical contribution to another) should be fluent in broad knowledge transfer-related aspects. In other words, barriers to building theories are not only tied to insufficient methodological inquiry-related standards but also related to knowledge and the multi-dimensional individual, institutional, and contextual factors of its transfer.

Following the theory-building literature (Aguinis and Cronin, 2022; Thatcher and Fisher, 2021; Weick, 1995; Whetten, 1989), we understand *theory* broadly as various kinds of theoretical contributions and "theorizing" (including models, new typologies, conceptual frameworks, conjectures, or structured propositions), which addresses a clearly stated research question, meets well-defined methodological criteria, guides research practice, and challenges and extends existing knowledge. However broadly conceived, theoretical contributions must be methodologically rigorous and integral to the scientific inquiry.

The analogy: Theory building and organizational knowledge transfer

We submit that the stickiness of concepts can be examined systematically as an integrated investigation of barriers to knowledge transfer between the scholars involved in building theoretical contributions. An integrative knowledge transfer approach is novel in theory-building literature, but it is also fairly intuitive, as the question of impediments to knowing is well-known in the research on organizational knowledge (Argote and Ingram,

2000; Szulanski, 1996, 2008)—as much as the question of barriers to scientific progress in the field of management (Cannella and Paetzold, 1994; Pfeffer, 1993). There are at least three motivations to see theory building through the lens of knowledge transfer:

(1) The transfer of best practices within the firm and knowledge between scholars involved in theory building can be described as a process. Processual approaches to theory building are a standard (Dubin, 1978; Kaplan, 1964; Lynham, 2002). Additionally, ideas such as traveling theory (Oswick *et al.,* 2011), an idea journey (Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2017), or journey of novelty (Cattani *et al.,* 2017) play important roles in understanding the process of theory building and describing selected aspects of the knowledge transfer between scholars involved in theory building.

(2) The knowledge transfer literature in business builds on the key ideas of Shannon's theory of communication (Shannon, 1948; Shannon and Weaver, 1949), which is general enough to be used in the context of theoretical knowledge. Although Shannon's framework—based on information transmission that embraces a message, a source, a recipient, one or more communication channels, and a context—may suggest that the transfer is fluent, rapid, and costless, the knowledge transfer literature has shown that it faces significant barriers (Attewell, 1992; Szulanski, 1996; Yih-Tong Sun and Scott, 2005). Because these barriers exist in theory building, we maintain that the approach based on Shannon's theory offers a useful starting point for modelling barriers in this realm of inquiry.

(3) The goal of knowledge transfer in both practical and theoretical areas is optimization or *improvement*: for organizations, it is the implementation of best business practices and know-how (Szulanski, 1996); for the community of theorists, it is theory growth, innovation, and knowledge advancement (Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970; Pfeffer, 1993; Popper, 1962). Knowledge is critical for development and innovation (value creation), whether the context is practical or theoretical.

Additionally, considering that the perspective of knowledge transfer has become an established topic within the philosophy of science (Herfeld and Lisciandra, 2019), it is reasonable to posit that barriers within the scientific community engaged in theory building can be analyzed through the lens of knowledge transfer. Such a framework cannot be

mechanically imported from the context of practical knowledge[1]. Initial assumptions about the barriers in these contexts also differ. Organizational knowledge transfer treats barriers rather unidimensionally as detrimental to practice (Argote and Ingram, 2000; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Stadler *et al*., 2022; Szulanski, 2000). In the case of theory building, the character of barriers appears to be more complex. In our view, the events perceived as barriers are not always outright adverse for scientific practice (understood as inquiry-driven, institutionalized research). Several possible scenarios: some barriers may boost highly creative theory building, while others may be neutral or detrimental. Hence, our approach proposes that the systematic understanding of the stickiness concepts, including potential strategic actions and organizational investments in policy to remove it from the social process of theory building, should underscore this complexity. Standard scenarios in which all barriers are negative should be complemented by scenarios in which barriers boost creative thinking, so they are beneficial for scientific practice, at least in some cases.

The knowledge transfer framework

The analogy between organizational knowledge transfer and the transfer involved in theory building allows us to propose a new framework in which the stickiness of concepts can be (to an extent) predicted. In line with the organizational knowledge transfer literature (Albino *et al.,* 2004; Joshi *et al.,* 2007; Szulanski, 2000), we build the framework on Shannon's theory of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949), which involves five

[1] Organizational knowledge transfer typically focuses on groups, whereas theory building often involves individual-level knowledge. The former emphasizes replication, while the latter centers on creating new knowledge.

building blocks to model information transmission: a *message*, a *source*, a *recipient*, one or more *communication channels*, and a *context*.

These building blocks need to be reinterpreted in the light of theory building. We define the *message* as a theoretical contribution communicated in a certain academically or scientifically standardized form (a theory paper, a book, a model, a typology, or a document with a set of structured propositions). The *source* is the author(s) of a theoretical contribution. The *recipient* is the scholarly audience represented by theory evaluators (usually peer reviewers). *Communication channels* connect the source and recipient in various ways, allowing them to transfer the message. *Context* embraces numerous field-, institution-, and culture-related factors that affect the transfer. In this framework, if the stickiness of concepts in theory building exists, it is associated with any of those building blocks of knowledge transfer. Concepts are sticky because the process in this framework is sticky.

When do we know that the process is sticky? According to Szulanski, when a difficulty in knowledge transfer exceeds a certain experiential threshold for the actors involved in the process, it generates problems: "Other things equal, a transfer is more likely to be perceived as difficult or sticky when efforts to resolve transfer problems become noteworthy" (Szulanski, 2000, p.11). We maintain that this approach is suitable for thinking about theory building. Those noteworthy problems are familiar not only to most scientists attempting to publish their ideas in journals but have also been extensively examined in the literature on peer review concerning conservative or biased evaluations, or the unclear status of unpublished contributions (Gustafson, 1975; Lee *et al.,* 2013; Shatz, 2004). Other forms of stickiness may reside in the barren academic context, such as a lack of suitable collaborators

or resources (Hwang, 2013; Matthews *et al.,* 2020). All transfer elements (and their combinations) may generate barriers.

STICKINESS AND THE FOUR PHASES OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the stickiness of concepts, we need not only the actors and elements required for the knowledge transfer in theory building but also a sufficient understanding of the phases of that transfer. Processual approaches to theory building are standard; such processes have been mapped in various ways in organizational, applied, and behavioral sciences (Dubin, 1978; Kaplan, 1964; Lynham, 2002). We map the process as a transfer consisting of four main phases. Adapting to our context the terminology proposed by Szulanski (2000), we obtain: (1) *theory generation*—a typically inquiry-related phase of the process in which concepts, propositions, and arguments are logically strung together to explain a phenomenon; (2) *theory articulation* is the elaboration of the idea in the form of a scholarly standardized theoretical contribution (article, book, or essay); (3) *theory ramp-up* is when a theoretical contribution has an opportunity to be defended and strengthened; and (4) *theory integration* allows theoretical contributions to join existing research. Let us characterize these phases in more detail.

(1) *Theory generation* is the initial phase of constructing a theory, a typical object of interest in methodologically oriented literature (Kaplan, 1964; Swanson and Chermack, 2013). As a process, theory generation can be broken into sub-phases that address specific methodological aspects of inquiry. So, the process looks somewhat different depending on the inductive (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2007) or abductive method (Hanson, 1958; Sætre and Ven, 2021) and the analytical or empirical approach (Wacker, 1998), conceptualization or reconceptualization (Makowski, 2021), as well as programmatic or unit orientation

(Aguinis and Cronin, 2022; Cronin *et al.*, 2021). There are also many other nuances, such as observation, operationalization, prediction, and testing. Without exploring the steps and intricacies required to generate a theory (a good or potentially good one) (Aguinis and Cronin, 2022), we consider it a phase that *initiates the transfer*. During this phase, theoretical ideas are conceived ("conceptualized") and initially structured in scientific terms. From a stickiness of concepts perspective, theory generation is already crucial as it initiates a process where methodological challenges appear (Bacharach, 1989; Wacker, 1998), which primarily relate to theoretical rigor (Donaldson *et al*., 2013; Samuelson, 2006; Stewart and Barrick, 2012). Because of dependence on specific research methods, theoretical perspectives, and different perceptions of what amounts to rigorous theorizing, rigor itself can be understood as an inquiry-related form of stickiness that gains importance at later, more social stages of the process.

(2) *Theory articulation* is a phase of elaborating scientifically framed ideas through a scholarly, standardized theoretical contribution. Theoretical contributions may take various forms, and not all are equally acceptable to the public. Scholarship has recently focused on the role of writing (articles, books, or essays), the standards of which serve as an initial social filter for theoretical contributions (Huff, 1999; McCloskey, 2000). Recommendations on how to implement a theory in papers are now paradigmatic in the *Academy of Management Review* (Barney, 2018; Lange and Pfarrer, 2017; Thatcher and Fisher, 2021), but they are also present in the strategic management literature (Bhardwaj *et al.,* 2025; Makadok *et al.,* 2018). All this matters for transferring theoretical knowledge, which must be materialized as something "submittable" and go through a more comprehensive social evaluation (Magnifico, 2010; McCloskey, 1983). Scientifically promising and rigorous theories (constructed in light of the

best conceptual and methodological standards) may fail to find their way to publication if they do not meet widely accepted academic standards—a key dimension of stickiness related to language, style, and academic form behind arguments and writing.[2] One may be a good and rigorous theorist, but if one ignores the standards of academic writing, their message may not be adopted by the target audience.

(3) We define *theory ramp-up* as the phase that embraces all social actions and events during which theory builders have a chance to defend, strengthen, and promote their theoretical contributions. This phase embraces not only the peer-review process (Bedeian, 2003; Bornmann, 2008) but also responses to critical papers, reactions to theories in journals or book reviews, and responses to those reactions. This phase is a necessary dimension of the social construction of knowledge (Astley, 1985; Bedeian, 2004). It is crucial for academic recognition. No surprise, barriers that appear during this phase are rich, often painful for the source (Bundy *et al*., 2022; cf. Campbell and Aguilera, 2022) and engage almost all possible societal factors into which science is entangled (from communication to power), as highlighted in the literature on rejection (Bailar, 1991; Bornmann and Daniel, 2007; Day, 2011). The history of science is replete with spectacular examples of theories that initially failed to overcome stickiness at the stage of theory ramp-up. George Akerlof's (1970) "The Market for *Lemons*" was rejected by three journals before publication in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, which ultimately resulted in a Nobel Prize (2001) awarded for the analysis of markets with asymmetric information (Akerlof, 2001).

[2] This is why phases (1) and (2) constitute separate parts of the process, although in practice they often go together (Roederer *et al.,* 2013).

(4) *Theory integration* allows theoretical contributions to join existing research. There can be several layers of integration. The first one is publication after peer review. A proper integration, however, appears when theories gain traction in scientific literature, signaled by the number of forward citations (especially those indicating support). Although in the area of management, articles' citations appear to grow continuously after publication (Finardi, 2014), there can be 'sleeping beauties'—papers recognized with a delay (Lachance and Larivière, 2014). The story behind "The Market for *Lemons*" is instructive in these terms, suggesting that highly innovative theories may find stickiness at various stages of the process. Theories that can travel beyond their original field display a different integration (cf. Oswick *et al.,* 2011). An exemplar is the popularity of the 'iron cage' metaphor (Weber, 1930) and the related institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), which originated in sociology.

Regardless of the circumstances, integration takes time and is related to theoretical growth (Davis, 2010; Wagner and Berger, 1985). The most salient barriers in this phase are related to the development of scientific paradigms, programs, and research lenses (Pfeffer, 1993). Revolutionary or highly innovative theories usually have much longer paths to integration. This development also embraces its very first step of publication. To take an example from physics: Higgs's (1964) model of the boson particle was rejected "on the grounds that it did not warrant rapid publication" (www.ph.ed.ac.uk, 2014). There may also be social, cultural, and political barriers that block long-term integration. Take global warming, for instance. Although the problem of adaptation to climate change is practical (Moser and Ekstrom, 2010), it is driven by strongly opposing theoretical views (Bast, 2010).

As a phenomenon involved in theory building, the stickiness of concepts is heterogeneous and emerges from each knowledge transfer phase. Some apparent tendencies make certain dimensions and types of stickiness unproblematic. For instance, barriers constituted by rigor and the logic of inquiry—particularly visible in theory generation and theory ramp-up—can be a serious worry for theorists seeking to innovate at all costs (Makowski, 2021) but do not seem to belong to the scope of challenges of theory building as far as the logic of scientific inquiry is concerned. Such barriers are often just standards to meet rather than real impediments; they generate stickiness when there is room for disagreement about what standards should be followed and to what extent. Although organizational theories may be to some extent useful without rigor, rigor is helpful for their growth (Davis, 2010; Palmer *et al.,* 2009), for their scientific quality (Gnyawali and Song, 2016; Makowski, 2021), as well as for their diffusion and impact (von Nordenflycht, 2023). Indeed, scientific rigor is as much an asset for theory building as experience (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011; Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017), and expertise (Cross and Sproull, 2004; Lewin and Cartwright, 1951) are for organizational knowledge transfer and learning (Crossan et al., 1999; Schilling & Kluge, 2009). Thus, barriers imposed by the rigor and logic of scientific inquiry are not a real hindrance to theory building[3]. Rigor becomes a problematic form of stickiness only in specific types of theorizing, for instance, in qualitative or transdisciplinary research (Belcher *et al.,* 2015; Nowell and Albrecht, 2019) and in the more socially significant stages of the

[3] Although questionable research practices (*P*-hacking, HARKing, and cherry-picking) require some creativity to crush methodological barriers and construct empirics-based theoretical contributions, we do not want to discuss this issue under the umbrella of theory building.

process. This challenge is particularly evident when theorists encounter differing perceptions and understandings of what qualifies as a rigorous theoretical contribution (besides the standard values of inquiry, such as explicitness, replicability, openness to critique, and freedom from bias). Also, theory ramp-up appears crucial regarding social (e.g., power-related) barriers harmful to theory building. To embrace all those barriers and their dialectic relation to creativity, we propose to examine the stickiness of concepts through the lens of the building blocks of the theory of communication: the theoretical message, its source and its recipients, the communication channel(s), and the context. In Table 1, we synthetically report the sources and nature of stickiness in the phases of theory building, listing a few more noticeable examples for harmful and beneficial forms of stickiness.

--- Please insert Table 1 about here ---

Key predictors of stickiness

One advantage of thinking of knowledge transfer in the way initiated by Szulanski (2000, 2008) is the possibility of predicting stickiness. We propose to seek the predictors of the stickiness of concepts in relation to the elements required for theory transfer.

First, barriers can relate to the *message*. Theoretical contributions have both scientific and academic *quality*. The scientific quality is defined by the logic of inquiry, methodological standards (rigor), and the authors' degree of scientific expertise in building theory. A message must meet these standards in theory building and is evaluated from this perspective during the theory ramp-up, in the review processes. Regarding knowledge transfer-related stickiness, the academic quality of the message takes precedence. The message must conform to writing and scholarly communication standards to transform an idea into a published scholarly theory. Recommendations on how to formulate a message in theory journals (Barney, 2018; Campbell

and Aguilera, 2022; Thatcher and Fisher, 2021) can be perceived as institutional efforts to facilitate the transfer of the message and to remove stickiness more generally.

Recent efforts to include the so-called 'grey literature' (Adams *et al.,* 2017) into what counts as a scientific message show that academic standards fluctuate, which may sometimes confound authors and reviewers, leading to additional stickiness. For example, if certain information floating around the Internet can find its way to recipients as theoretical knowledge, but it is not properly acknowledged as a message (or its part), resistance to it from various parties may be significant. For instance, theoretical knowledge is sometimes embedded in scientific blogs (cf. Batts *et al.,* 2008). Yet, if it fails to be recognized as a message worth attention, the likelihood of transferring this knowledge further in the process becomes minimal.

Second, if the relationship between the source (theory builders) and recipients (reviewers, evaluators, and editors) who facilitate the path of the message to a broader audience is "arduous" (Szulanski, 1996), it may make the transfer very difficult. This challenge is especially salient in *theory articulation*. The issue of academic communication is entangled in various implicit personal, societal, and cultural factors, which can make the relationship between the source and the recipient particularly "arduous." Rough or even hostile communication between authors and reviewers (in peer reviews or emails) cannot be an effective barrier to block the transfer of a given message, but overall, it is a significant predictor of stickiness, especially in combination with other barriers. The literature on peer review offers a wide array of examples of communication-related stickiness and attempts to remove it (Bornmann, 2008; Campbell and Aguilera, 2022; Krlev and Spicer, 2023; Lee *et*

al., 2013; Shatz, 2004). Recommendations on how to write cover letters to editors (John, 2011) or respond to reviewers' comments (Sullivan *et al.,* 2019; Wong, 2019) play similar roles.

Third, communication between the source and the recipient is significantly affected by their respective *dispositions and motivations*: deficits of reliability and trustworthiness (Becerra *et al.,* 2008; Szulanski *et al.,* 2004), attitudes related to tribalism (Gulati, 2007; Leijonhufvud, 1973), or unhealthy scholarly competition may impede theory transfer at various phases. Again, theory ramp-up appears to be the most vulnerable, since authors and reviewers frequently have their theoretical perspectives and beliefs, which may, often implicitly, affect authors' and reviewers' reactions and critiques. The presence of such themes as negative evaluation (Amabile, 1983) or gatekeeping (Bornmann and Daniel, 2007; Cattani *et al*., 2014; Corra and Willer, 2002) in organizational scholarship suggests a strong need to better understand those dispositions and motivations, especially on the receiving side of the process. Institutional actions that explicitly motivate recipients to be open (Cornelissen and Höllerer, 2019; Tihanyi, 2020) and inclusive (Thatcher, 2021; Umphress *et al.,* 2022) may be perceived as attempts to attenuate stickiness.

Motivations and dispositions also embrace the question of the perceived reliability and trustworthiness of the source (Latusek and Hensel, 2022; Szulanski *et al*., 2004). Recipients' bad will and biased evaluations are a persistent problem in academia (Martinko *et al.,* 2000). What source counts as reliable and trustworthy may depend on the network to which both authors and recipients belong. As Daron Acemoğlu noticed, "people who are part of a network tend to get better treatment in journals" (Bowmaker, 2013, p.11). Otherwise, stereotypes and biases of recipients frequently kick in. Lessons from cognitive science and the work on bounded rationality suggest that the more uncertainty is attached to the source and the quality

of the message, the more biased (*ceteris paribus*) the recipient is. (Kahneman *et al.,* 1982). This bias is particularly salient in the case of recognition of particularly creative theoretical contributions and novelty (Cattani *et al.,* 2022; Mueller *et al.,* 2011) or in the case of theory contributions, the source of which is from a radically different social or cultural context (Mir and Mir, 2012). Projects to build indigenous theory by inviting co-authors central to the scholarly network of the audience (Bruton *et al.,* 2022) aim to mitigate stickiness related to this particular problem.

Fourth, the recipients' lack of *absorptive capacity* to accept new theories (i.e., the ability to absorb and leverage new knowledge) (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002) is another significant predictor of stickiness. The lack of recipients' absorptive capacity may be associated with their skepticism or ignorance (Campanario and Acedo, 2007), but also depends on their particular theoretical backgrounds and history, which leads them to develop preferences for given research perspectives, affecting their overall conservatism (Miles and Suddaby, 2012). Even if there is a widely recognized predilection for outsider knowledge in organizational settings (Cattani *et al.*, 2017; Menon and Pfeffer, 2003), the lack of absorptive capacity may explain why this preference does not exist in the case of theoretical contributions from scholars who do not belong to a given stream of research or field.

The *academic context* is the final category of predictors of the stickiness of concepts in the proposed model. It embraces the organizations to which the source belongs, their social capital, and networks. The impact of networks and social capital on knowledge transfer and value creation is widely known (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005, 2016; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998), so there are reasons to see it also in the case of theory building. Szulanski distinguished between fertile and barren contexts: "[A] context that facilitates the development of transfers is said to

be fertile. Conversely, a context that hinders the gestation and evolution of transfers is said to be barren" (1996, p.32). This distinction works also for theory building: an academic barren context of a talented author (e.g. an unimpressive academic affiliation, a poor network of contacts, or negative relationships) can hinder the transfer of her high-quality theoretical contributions (Labianca and Brass, 2006). Also, academic rankings and similar "engines of anxiety" (Espeland, 2016) as indicators of (the lack of) prestige and quality may be independent determinants of stickiness when they belong to the academic context of the source (Adler and Harzing, 2009). This issue is frequently intertwined with insufficient dispositions of recipients to transfer.

We see that the integrated framework based on communication theory ameliorates the perspective on the stickiness of concepts. Some barriers cannot be detected when we go through each transfer phase involved in theory building (for example, the issue of academic context). We are now able to diversify the perspective on stickiness further.

The interplay between stickiness and creativity

Stickiness in theory building is not always harmful to scientific practice, as it can foster a complex dialectic and generative relationship with creativity. Creativity, understood as the "generation or production of ideas that are both novel and useful" (George, 2007, p.441), is one of the requirements of novelty in theoretical contributions (Cattani *et al.,* 2022). If creativity takes the form of inventiveness of the source, it may enter the scene when the source faces stickiness. Contrary to the intuitions behind more standard approaches to barriers to knowledge transfer, obstacles may indeed improve the quality of the message when it catalyzes authors' creativity: as a result, authors may reposition the initial idea they submitted, expand their network by establishing new connections that are needed to improve the idea

(Uzzi and Spiro, 2005) or interrupt their work to give opportunity for creative incubation (Jett and George, 2003; Shin and Grant, 2021). These ideas are known in the literature on paradox mindset: when obstacles are perceived as opportunities, creativity is enhanced (Liu *et al.,* 2020b; Miron-Spektor *et al.,* 2017). From this perspective, stickiness looks inherently ambiguous. The higher the creativity the source brings, the more likely a given event experienced as a stickiness will be considered an opportunity for knowledge transfer associated with theory development and not a real impediment. Of course, there are boundary conditions. Entirely negative experiences (e.g., useless reviews and hostile editors) do not give growth opportunities and are not beneficial for scientific practice. Moreover, creativity is also limited by the academic standards expected for the message (Leone *et al.,* 2021). Nevertheless, creativity may affect all stickiness predictors (Figure 1).

--- Please insert Figure 1 about here ----

In what follows, we present the process of theory building as a special kind of iterative interplay between creativity and the stickiness of concepts in each phase of the process. On the one hand, we will illustrate how theory builders need to adjust to the barriers in developing their theories, which may be inherent to theoretical novelty. On the other hand, we will see how theory developers can harness or imbue stickiness in theoretical development to make their theories even more creative. As a result, the work of theoretical development will appear as an ambidextrous and balancing act between creativity and stickiness (still possible to model within the modified framework of Szulanski).

Creativity in the process of theory building

Besides serving as an input for the entire process of theory building, creativity also influences all phases of the stickiness of concepts processual model, shaping how scientists

deal with the barriers that emerge in the theory-building process. In this section, we trace the role of emerging creativity through the phases of theory generation, theory articulation, theory ramp-up, and theory integration to demonstrate its connection to stickiness. As we propose, there is an iterative interplay between creativity and stickiness[4].

In the phase of *theory generation*, creativity research has mostly illuminated how concepts originate: from serendipitous encounters with individuals offering new problem perspectives and fortuitous mental associations, to more scientific and controllable practices such as analyzing mixed or unexpected results (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Sadler-Smith, 2008; Thagard, 1997). While the origin of theoretical concepts is central to theory building and scientific progress, it is worth noting that these intuitions emerge as metaphors or "a-ha" moments and are frequently a-theoretical: they may lack formalization or integration into a system of propositions (Nersessian, 2008; Sadler-Smith, 2008). During this phase, introducing rigor requires translating concepts from mental representations to formalized, intersubjectively communicable ideas—shareable, structured, and usually written. Such a translation between modes of representations, from mental to written, can inherently induce change and transform the original idea (e.g., Islam *et al.,* 2016). Introducing rigor may motivate epistemic search outside a specific knowledge domain when scientists are unfamiliar with the language needed for translating their ideas (i.e., finding the appropriate lexicon to describe and embed the concept). In this case, theory generation takes on a social dimension, as new connections with other scientists help navigate the complexities of a new field of science. For instance, Albert

[4] Because stickiness offers an opportunity to boost creativity in each phase of the process, their relationship can be described not only in terms of repetition but also in terms of feedback loops and recursiveness.

Einstein sought help to draw a system of equations that could describe a new theory of gravitation. The emerging collaboration with the mathematician Élie Cartan and the eventual mathematical modelling of the theory led to a higher level of abstraction and generality (Fayard and Metiu, 2014). And even though in social science mathematical language is not the most obvious choice to translate our thoughts and intuitions into rigorous written words, meeting the constraints and opportunities of a formal lexicon may produce substantial conceptual change: greater generality, conceptual enrichment, or even reframing the original idea (Peng *et al.,* 2020; Tsoukas, 2009).

In sum, during theory generation, stickiness is instantiated by scientific rigor and its perceptions, and we argue it should be seen as an opportunity for creativity. Rigor is necessary for scientists who must render their message intelligible to the target community of scientists and provide an opportunity for the message to undergo conceptual development. As adding rigor involves translating the message across modes of communication (e.g., from a mental representation to a written representation and a synthetic graphic representation with boxes and arrows), each translation is an opportunity to enhance the message's creative value.

In the phase of *theory articulation*, scholarly works aim at shaping the idea into a form acceptable to the public; recipients' expectations and standards of acceptability are, at this point, a mental construction of what authors think the message should be. In this phase, meeting the goal of authoring a research paper requires seeking an appropriate framing for the creative concept or theory, situating it in the relevant literature, and outlining novel and useful implications. While this phase has mostly been associated with meeting formal requirements for scholarly publications, which vary across journals and disciplines, we posit that activities and choices involved during theory articulation also have a significant impact on the

innovativeness of theory building that scholars can achieve (Locke and GoldenBiddle, 1997; McCloskey, 1983). Thinking of theory articulation as comprising two main activities—writing and choosing the outlet for submission—we better appreciate how a scientific message might undergo varying degrees of change and how creativity stems from it. For simplicity and clarity, we will treat these activities as distinct, even though they are interwoven[5].

Authoring the paper or the book (the first activity) involves situating the message in the literature, finding an appropriate framing, and carving out a contribution. While writing, scholars are exposed to various concepts and models that must be carefully understood and addressed before being tethered to the message. Thus, situating the message in the literature may reveal unexpected layers, some novel and useful, others trite. In this phase, the philosophy of science is typically related to the context of justification (Reichenbach, 1938; Schickore, 2022). Authors can produce an appropriate ground for the message by rendering prior theorization consistent with the contribution, either as a coherent body of work that is nevertheless inadequate or incomplete, or by stressing its non-coherence (Locke and GoldenBiddle, 1997; McCloskey, 1994). This work goes hand in hand with finding an appropriate framing, which aims to highlight the message's most creative, counterintuitive, and relevant aspects.

[5] As one of the reviewers rightly noticed, one could develop a theory without publishing it. For the sake of simplicity, we do not include such instances of "private theorizing" in our model. This approach is justified because we treat scientific theorizing as a social process.

Choosing the outlet for submission can be viewed as 'setting the bar' for creativity[6] and, in terms of our framework, as accepting a certain degree of quality-related stickiness: requiring that the message meets research excellence criteria considered binding by their authors. Going for an outlet known for crispier theoretical contributions and sharper theorizing prepares the authors, who know that their message will undergo a rigorous peer-review and confronts them with the need to undergo the activities involved in writing the paper with more scrutiny (e.g., ensuring that all recent relevant theory has been reviewed), paying attention to the theoretical nuances (i.e., ensuring that related concepts have been appropriately reviewed and tethered to the one being proposed by the authors), and focussing on impact (e.g., ensuring that boundary conditions and research implications are spelled out). In these cases, typical strategies involve continuing along the rhetorical trajectory established in the theory development part of the manuscript and focusing on the aspect that makes the message appropriate for creating coherence through a new perspective. Indeed, how high the bar is set affects authors' degree of creativity in this phase, as it may stimulate them to engage more deeply with the extant research to extract novelty from the idea.

An iterative link between creativity and stickiness in the phase of theory articulation is visible. Stickiness is present in a scientific message; its various academic forms may be embedded in the outlet's submission guidelines and enhanced by the author's first-hand or indirect experience. The link is complex: creativity depends on, is influenced by, and influences stickiness, as stricter quality criteria impose greater requirements on the scientific

[6] Thinking of it otherwise would be to admit that there is a one-to-one mapping between theoretical contributions and outlets, which is not the case, as failed contributions are often revised and submitted to alternative outlets.

message. Also, a message's creativity may prompt the authors to respond selectively to the barriers they face.

In the phase of *theory ramp-up*, the articulated message is now a fully-fledged theoretical contribution submitted for peer review as an original manuscript or a response to another author's critique. Recipients are the subset of the academic audience who most directly scrutinize the message. In this phase, the author's goal is to meet recipients' expectations for novelty, usefulness, relevance, and rigor of the message, which can be perceived as stickiness in the theory ramp-up. The process of theory ramp-up is inherently iterative, as the message is usually submitted multiple times to the same publisher before being accepted, and in the case of rejection—the strongest manifestation of stickiness—it is often submitted to a different outlet. Even though recipients are unknown, and their scrutiny may not be entirely objective, as demonstrated by peer reviews that regularly point to various issues in the paper, the process is far from random. The scope for injecting creativity into the message remains available and may even be recommended by recipients (e.g., reviewers and editors). In this phase, creativity embraces various aspects of the process: polishing or sharpening the message and its main idea, establishing relationships between the parts of the message, and including or removing concepts (Locke and GoldenBiddle, 1997; McCloskey, 2000).

If we look closely at the interaction between barriers and creativity, peer reviews, editorial letters, and critical papers offer a wealth of suggestions to adjust or enhance the creativity of the message (and generally, in social and organizational research, they often contain too many elements that must be carefully considered before being incorporated). Although peer reviews might be emotionally costly, especially for the sense of ownership that scholars may feel toward their ideas (Baer and Brown, 2012; Pierce *et al.*, 2001, 2003), we

posit that fostering the recombination of concepts and a more creative and efficient response to review letters, dialogue papers, or critical reviews can be aided by scholars becoming aware of the natural negative emotional experience, while refocusing on the task at hand (Campbell and Aguilera, 2022; Sargeant *et al*., 2008).

Thus, the relation between creativity and stickiness is iterative in the phase of the theory ramp-up. Here, the recipients' actions often constitute forms of stickiness, but they also provide opportunities for creativity: inputs, suggestions, or demands for changes, which feed back into the process through which authors re-tailor the message (Barney, 2018; Campbell and Aguilera, 2022; Thatcher and Fisher, 2021).

Theory integration, the last phase of the transfer, is related to the broader social impact of a message. In strategic management and organizational research, we can relate this aspect to the wider impact of management theories, business education (Pettigrew and Starkey, 2016; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004) and the actionability of knowledge (Aguinis and Cronin, 2022; Parkhe, 2024). This phase may seem to have little room for creativity. However, if we conceptualize stickiness as the resistance encountered when a message is disseminated in the scientific community to which the message is addressed, we can see that even when a theoretical contribution is accepted for publication and its scientific destiny seems to be primarily out of the control of its authors, it is not entirely so. Indeed, such a conceptualization may help us address recent calls for a more pluralist understanding of the scholarly impact that broadens the theory recipients beyond the community of academics (cf. Aguinis *et al.,* 2014; Ozanne *et al.,* 2017). Even though the process appears to be finished for the source in purely epistemic terms, there is room for creativity in the social or academic dimensions of theory integration. Authors can find ways to influence how their message is received,

incorporated into future scientific messages, and disseminated, which is strategically important in the "big picture" of knowledge transfer.

In this phase, the authors' likelihood of controlling short-term theory integration is entangled in complex social and institutional processes, which are no less important than those concerning long-term theory integration and epistemic growth (cf. Davis, 2015). Authors may engage in several activities that potentially increase the chances of integration and its tempo. Publishers' actions—driven by performance management—currently facilitate this process by encouraging authors to disseminate their work (through social media and direct sharing of their work with other theorists). Post-publication expert panels and workshops also open spaces for authors' creativity. The social laws of academic networks are fully available to theorists even at this phase of the process. Although a creative use of those networks may be perceived as a kind of impression management of questionable value (Casciaro *et al.,* 2014), it may still serve as an impactful dissemination strategy (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Schniederjans *et al*., 2013). This shows that theory integration may partially depend on the creativity of the source, at least in the short run (MacIntosh *et al.,* 2017).

In sum, stickiness and creativity are iterative and involve theory integration. Stickiness in this phase refers to the resistance encountered when a message is incorporated or disseminated in the scientific discipline or community to which it is addressed. Authors can be creative in their attempts to lower such resistance, facilitating the acceptance of their message. An important consideration emerges at the end of this discussion. The overall dialectics between creativity and stickiness exhibit notable parallels with the process of organizational learning previously mentioned (Schilling & Kluge, 2009). As highlighted in the literature, organizational learning is shaped by psychological, social, and political

processes (Crossan et al., 1999; Lawrence et al., 2005). In this perspective, the social dimensions of theory building reveal affinities with organizational learning, further highlighting the value of adopting a more integrated and managerially oriented perspective on the stickiness of concepts.

CONCLUSION: AMBIGUITY OF STICKINESS IN THEORY BUILDING–MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our model of theory building involves knowledge transfer, primarily based on the framework proposed by Szulanski (1996, 2000, 2008), that helps generate an integrated image showing why theory construction is difficult and in what sense it needs creativity. The difficulty of the process is not just methodological or inquiry-related, as we are taught in schools. It is hard as a social or academic process. To an extent, this difficulty comes as a truism known to all theorists who try to "sell" their contributions to the highly competitive market of ideas. Still, an integrated approach to barriers to theory building, which tracks virtually any possible combination of social and typical academic factors affecting theory building, reveals its deep strategic potential that could lead to significant changes in academia. Such an approach allows us to recognize better what types of stickiness are particularly harmful, what phases of the process are sensitive to it, and where creativity has its balancing and improving effect. All this could prove highly important for the academic organization of the theory-building process and for restoring a taste for science (Bresser and Balkin, 2022; Merton, 1973).

Thus, the first consequence of our proposal is similar to that of the know-how within organizations: obtaining a strategic ground for better organizational flexibility that helps remove the barriers to theory building and makes the process socially fluent and more rational.

Initially, we pointed to the analogy between the strategic knowledge tradeoff of exploitation and exploration (Boumgarden *et al.,* 2012) and the dynamics between barriers and creativity. Our model indicates that stickiness is, to some degree, manageable, and authors (as well as strategists and entrepreneurs) should embrace stickiness (Miron-Spektor *et al.,* 2022), reinforcing this analogy. Although this analogy does not invite using identical strategic approaches to those commonly used in organizational knowledge, typically oriented around ambidexterity and vacillation (Boumgarden *et al.,* 2012; Luger *et al.,* 2018)—the dialectics of stickiness and creativity imply that ambidexterity is needed to address and mitigate stickiness. Domestication of new ideas needs to make room in the existing knowledge (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011; Oswick et al., 2011). This process requires not only the identification of and investment in removing stickiness from available theorizing (exploitation), but also creative exploration. Both dimensions are intertwined and essential for the effective embedding of new theoretical knowledge.

On the one hand, removing barriers may unlock strategic actions to improve theory construction, which we understand here as involving knowledge transfer. These actions include deepened cooperation between management/organizational scholarship and other disciplines of knowledge, both academic (e.g., social sciences) and non-academic (e.g., think tanks); cooperative production of interdisciplinary knowledge; and improved standards for peer review, postgraduate education, and other institutional measures. Such actions raise responsiveness and, ultimately, the standards of the entire knowledge transfer process. Our

model may appeal to the scholarship focused on more efficiently organizing knowledge and theory building (Ketokivi and Mahoney, 2023)[7].

On the other hand, viewing this process through the lens of creativity enhances our understanding of the dual nature of stickiness. Efforts to eliminate knowledge transfer impediments from theorizing are inherently limited, as these efforts inevitably face pressures from the logic of inquiry. Purely methodological forms of stickiness are essential not only as a guarantee of rigor (Leone *et al.,* 2021) but also as a driver of the creative processes required to develop and refine contributions beyond mere digestibility for recipients. Like exploratory views on organizational knowledge, managing barriers for theory building must account for the creative aspects of knowledge transfer. Acknowledging this requirement, however, does not mean we automatically advocate for the idea that all forms of stickiness are desirable or beneficial. Biases against novelty and a tendency toward conservatism are common in academic publishing and in attempts to develop and implement new theories of value in organizations (Felin and Zenger, 2017), which can be frustrating. Nevertheless, recognizing these biases and their existence is a significant step toward effectively addressing them.

To sum up, the ambiguity of stickiness in theory building has practical consequences. The knowledge transfer framework not only enables tracing virtually all forms of stickiness and their relation to creativity, but also implies the need for an ambidextrous balance: removing harmful forms of stickiness while making room for creativity.

---

[7] Except for a few illustrations, we limited our considerations to organizational and management research, but we submit that our model is largely valid for all types of theory building in the social, behavioral, and natural sciences. The phases we described are currently common in institutionalized research fields. Thus, the remedies to remove stickiness from the process of building theoretical contributions in all those fields appear to be similar to those in the field of organizational research.

REFERENCES

Acar, O.A., Tarakci, M., and van Knippenberg, D. (2019). Creativity and Innovation Under Constraints: A Cross-Disciplinary Integrative Review. *Journal of Management*, *45*(1), 96-121.

Adams, R.J., Smart, P., and Huff, A.S. (2017). Shades of Grey: Guidelines for Working with the Grey Literature in Systematic Reviews for Management and Organizational Studies *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *19*(4), 432-454.

Adler, N.J., and Harzing, A.-W. (2009). When Knowledge Wins: Transcending the Sense and Nonsense of Academic Rankings. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *8*(1), 72-95.

Aguinis, H., and Cronin, M.A. (2022). It's the Theory, Stupid. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 20413866221080629.

Aguinis, H., Shapiro, D.L., Antonacopoulou, E.P., and Cummings, T.G. (2014). Scholarly Impact: A Pluralist Conceptualization. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *13*(4), 623-639.

Akerlof, G.A. (1970). The Market for "Lemons": Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *84*(3), 488-500.

Akerlof, R. (2001). Writing the “The Market for ‘Lemons'”: A Personal Interpretive Essay. *The Nobel Prize*. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2001/akerlof/article/

Albino, V., Garavelli, A.C., and Gorgoglione, M. (2004). Organization and Technology in Knowledge Transfer. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, *11*(6), 584-600.

Amabile, T.M. (1983). Brilliant but Cruel: Perceptions of Negative Evaluators. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *19*(2), 146-156.

Anzola, D. (2019). Knowledge Transfer in Agent-based Computational Social Science. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, *77*, 29-38.

Argote, L., and Ingram, P. (2000). Knowledge Transfer: A Basis for Competitive Advantage in Firms. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *82*(1), 150-169.

Argote, L., Ingram, P., Levine, J.M., and Moreland, R.L. (2000). Knowledge Transfer in Organizations: Learning from the Experience of Others. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *82*(1), 1-8.

Argote, L., and Miron-Spektor, E. (2011). Organizational Learning: From Experience to Knowledge. *Organization Science*, *22*(5), 1123-1137.

Astley, W.G. (1985). Administrative Science as Socially Constructed Truth. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *30*(4), 497-513.

Attewell, P. (1992). Technology Diffusion and Organizational Learning: The Case of Business Computing. *Organization Science*, *3*(1), 1-19.

Bacharach, S.B. (1989). Organizational Theories: Some Criteria for Evaluation. *Academy of Management Review*, *14*(4), 496-515.

Baer, M. (2012). Putting Creativity to Work: The Implementation of Creative Ideas in Organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, *55*(5), 1102-1119.

Baer, M., and Brown, G. (2012). Blind in One Eye: How Psychological Ownership of Ideas Affects the Types of Suggestions People Adopt. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *118*(1), 60-71.

Bagozzi, R.P., Yi, Y., and Phillips, L.W. (1991). Assessing Construct Validity in Organizational Research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *36*(3), 421-458.

Bailar, J.C. (1991). Reliability, Fairness, Objectivity and Other Inappropriate Goals in Peer Review. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *14*(1), 137-138.

Bamberger, P. (2017). Construct Validity Research in AMD. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, *3*(3), 235-238.

Barney, J. (2018). Positioning a Theory Paper for Publication. *Academy of Management Review*, *43*(3), 345-348.

Bast, J.L. (2010). *Seven Theories of Climate Change*. Chicago: Heartland Institute.

Batts, S.A., Anthis, N.J., and Smith, T.C. (2008). Advancing Science through Conversations: Bridging the Gap between Blogs and the Academy. *PLoS biology*, *6*(9), e240.

Becerra, M., Lunnan, R., and Huemer, L. (2008). Trustworthiness, Risk, and the Transfer of Tacit and Explicit Knowledge Between Alliance Partners. *Journal of Management Studies*, *45*(4), 691-713.

Bedeian, A.G. (2003). The Manuscript Review Process: The Proper Roles of Authors, Referees, and Editors. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *12*(4), 331-338.

Bedeian, A.G. (2004). Peer Review and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Management Discipline. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *3*(2), 198-216.

Belcher, B.M., Rasmussen, K.E., Kemshaw, M.R., and Zornes, D.A. (2015). Defining and Assessing Research Quality in a Transdisciplinary Context. *Research Evaluation*, *25*(1), 1-17.

Ben-David, J., and Sullivan, T.A. (1975). Sociology of Science. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *1*(1), 203-222.

Berrone, P., Fosfuri, A., Gelabert, L., and Gomez-Mejia, L.R. (2013). Necessity as the Mother of 'Green' Inventions: Institutional Pressures and Environmental Innovations. *Strategic Management Journal*, *34*(8), 891-909.

Bhardwaj, A., Mahoney, J.T., and Nickerson, J. (2025). Problem formulation for theorizing at the frontier: An Oliver Williamson Inspired Approach. *Strategic Management Review*, *6*(3), 219-245.

Biscaro, C., Bruni, E., Cornelissen, J., and Oswick, C. (2025). Metaphor and Organization Studies: Going Beyond Resonance to Further Theory and Practice. *Organization Studies*, forthcoming.

Biscaro, C., and Comacchio, A. (2018). Knowledge Creation Across Worldviews: How Metaphors Impact and Orient Group Creativity. *Organization Science*, *29*(1), 58-79.

Biscaro, C., and Montanari, F. (2025). A Cognitive Network Perspective on Creativity. Theorizing Network Mobilization Scripts. *Organization Science*, *36*(2), 626-650.

Bornmann, L. (2008). Scientific Peer Review: An Analysis of the Peer Review Process from the Perspective of Sociology of Science Theories. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, *6*(2), 23-38.

Bornmann, L., and Daniel, H.-D. (2007). Gatekeepers of Science—Effects of External Reviewers' Attributes on the Assessments of Fellowship Applications. *Journal of Informetrics*, *1*(1), 83-91.

Boumgarden, P., Nickerson, J., and Zenger, T.R. (2012). Sailing into the Wind: Exploring the Relationships among Ambidexterity, Vacillation, and Organizational Performance. *Strategic Management Journal*, *33*(6), 587-610.

Bowmaker, S.W. (2013). *The Art and Practice of Economics Research. Lessons from Leading Minds*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Boxenbaum, E., and Rouleau, L. (2011). New Knowledge Products as Bricolage: Metaphors and Scripts in Organizational Theory. *Academy of Management Review*, *36*(2), 272-296.

Bresser, R.K.F., and Balkin, D.B. (2022). Restoring a Taste for Science: Enhancing Strategic Management Knowledge by Changing the Governance of Academic Journals. *Strategic Management Review*, *3*(1), 67-97.

Bruton, G.D., Zahra, S.A., Van de Ven, A.H., and Hitt, M.A. (2022). Indigenous Theory Uses, Abuses, and Future. *Journal of Management Studies*, *59*(4), 1057-1073.

Bundy, J., Shipp, A.J., and Brickson, S. (2022). Demystifying and Normalizing the Psychological Experience of Writing for AMR: A Qualitative Analysis of the Highs, Lows, and Suggested Coping Strategies. *Academy of Management Review*, *47*(3), 341-357.

Campanario, J.M., and Acedo, E. (2007). Rejecting Highly Cited Papers: The Views of Scientists Who Encounter Resistance to Their Discoveries From Other Scientists. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *58*(5), 734-743.

Campbell, J.T., and Aguilera, R.V. (2022). Why I Rejected Your Paper: Common Pitfalls in Writing Theory Papers and How to Avoid Them. *Academy of Management Review*, *47*(4), 521-527.

Cannella, A.A., and Paetzold, R.L. (1994). Pfeffer's Barriers to the Advance of Organizational Science: A Rejoinder. *Academy of Management Review*, *19*(2), 331-341.

Carlile, P.R. (2004). Transferring, Translating, and Transforming: An Integrative Framework for Managing Knowledge Across Boundaries. *Organization Science*, *15*(5), 555-568.

Casciaro, T., Gino, F., and Kouchaki, M. (2014). The Contaminating Effects of Building Instrumental Ties: How Networking Can Make Us Feel Dirty. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *59*(4), 705-735.

Cattani, G., Deichmann, D., and Ferriani, S. (Eds.). (2022). *The Generation, Recognition and Legitimation of Novelty*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.

Cattani, G., and Ferriani, S. (2008). A Core/Periphery Perspective on Individual Creative Performance: Social Networks and Cinematic Achievements in the Hollywood Film Industry. *Organization Science*, *19*(6), 824-844.

Cattani, G., Ferriani, S., and Allison, P. D. (2014). Insiders, Outsiders, and the Struggle for Consecration in Cultural Fields: A Core-Periphery Perspective. *American Sociological Review*, *79*(2), 258-281.

Cattani, G., Ferriani, S., and Lanza, A. (2017). Deconstructing the Outsider Puzzle: The Legitimation Journey of Novelty. *Organization Science*, *28*(6), 965-992.

Cohen, W.M., and Levinthal, D.A. (1990). Absorptive Capacity: A New Perspective on Learning and Innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *35*(1), 128-152.

Cornelissen, J.P. (2005). Beyond Compare: Metaphor in Organization Theory. *Academy of Management Review, 30*(4), 751-764.

Cornelissen, J.P., and Höllerer, M.A. (2019). An Open and Inclusive Space for Theorizing: Introducing Organization Theory. *Organization Theory*, *1*(1), 1-5.

Cornelissen, J.P., and Durand, R. (2012). More than Just Novelty: Conceptual Blending and Causality. *Academy of Management Review*, *37*(1), 152-154.

Corra, M., and Willer, D. (2002). The Gatekeeper. *Sociological Theory*, *20*(2), 180-207.

Cronin, M.A., Stouten, J., and van Knippenberg, D. (2021). The Theory Crisis in Management Research: Solving the Right Problem. *Academy of Management Review*, *46*(4), 667–683.

Cross, R., and Sproull, L. (2004). More Than an Answer: Information Relationships for Actionable Knowledge. *Organization Science*, *15*(4), 446-462.

Crossan, M.M., Lane, H.W., White, R.E., and Djurfeldt, L. (1995). Organizational Learning: Dimensions for a Theory. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, *3*(4), 337-360.

Curhan, J.R., Labuzova, T., and Mehta, A. (2021). Cooperative Criticism: When Criticism Enhances Creativity in Brainstorming and Negotiation. *Organization Science*, *32*(5), 1256-1272.

Davis, G.F. (2010). Do Theories of Organizations Progress? *Organizational Research Methods*, *13*(4), 690-709.

Davis, G.F. (2015). What Is Organizational Research For? *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *60*(2), 179-188.

Davis, K., and Moore, W. E. (1945). Some Principles of Stratification. *American Sociological Review*, *10*(2), 242-249.

Day, N.E. (2011). The Silent Majority: Manuscript Rejection and Its Impact on Scholars. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *10*(4), 704-718.

de Wit-de Vries, E., Dolfsma, W.A., van der Windt, H.J., and Gerkema, M.P. (2019). Knowledge Transfer in University–Industry Research Partnerships: A Review. *Journal of Technology Transfer*, *44*(4), 1236-1255.

DiMaggio, P.J., and Powell, W.W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(2), 147-160.

Donaldson, L., Qiu, J., and Luo, B.N. (2013). For Rigour in Organizational Management Theory Research. *Journal of Management Studies*, *50*(1), 153-172.

Dubin, R. (1978). *Theory Building*. New York: The Free Press.

Durand, R., Grant, R.M., and Madsen, T.L. (2017). The Expanding Domain of Strategic Management Research and the Quest for Integration. *Strategic Management Journal*, *38*(1), 4-16.

Easterby-Smith, M., Lyles, M.A., and Tsang, E.W.K. (2008). Inter-Organizational Knowledge Transfer: Current Themes and Future Prospects. *Journal of Management Studies*, *45*(4), 677-690.

Elsbach, K.D., and Sutton, R.I. (1992). Acquiring Organizational Legitimacy Through Illegitimate Actions: A Marriage of Institutional and Impression Management Theories. *Academy of Management Journal*, *35*(4), 699-738.

Espeland, W.N. and Sauder, M.R. (2016). *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputation, and Accountability*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Fabiano, G., Marcellusi, A., and Favato, G. (2020). Channels and Processes of Knowledge Transfer: How does Knowledge Move between University and Industry? *Science and Public Policy*, *47*(2), 256-270.

Fayard, A.L., and Metiu, A. (2014). The Role of Writing in Distributed Collaboration. *Organization Science*, *25*(5), 1391-1413.

Felin, T., and Zenger, T.R. (2017). The Theory-Based View: Economic Actors as Theorists. *Strategy Science*, *2*(4), 258-271.

Finardi, U. (2014). On the Time Evolution of Received Citations, in Different Scientific Fields: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Informetrics*, *8*(1), 13-24.

Fini, R., Jourdan, J., Perkmann, M., and Toschi, L. (2023). A New Take on the Categorical Imperative: Gatekeeping, Boundary Maintenance, and Evaluation Penalties in Science. *Organization Science*, *34*(3), 1090-1110.

George, J.M. (2007). Creativity in Organizations. *Academy of Management Annals*, *1*(1), 439-477.

Gioia, D.A., and Pitre, E. (1990). Multiparadigm Perspectives on Theory Building. *Academy of Management Review*, *15*(4), 584-602.

Glaser, B.G., and Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine.

Gnyawali, D.R., and Song, Y. (2016). Pursuit of Rigor in Research: Illustration from Coopetition Literature. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *57*(1), 12-22.

Goncalo, J.A., Chatman, J.A., Duguid, M.M., and Kennedy, J. A. (2015). Creativity from Constraint? How the Political Correctness Norm Influences Creativity in Mixed-sex Work Groups. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *60*(1), 1-30.

Grodal, S., Anteby, M., and Holm, A.L. (2021). Achieving Rigor in Qualitative Analysis: The Role of Active Categorization in Theory Building. *Academy of Management Review*, *46*(3), 591-612.

Gulati, R. (2007). Tent Poles, Tribalism, and Boundary Spanning: The Rigor-Relevance Debate in Management Research. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*(4), 775-782.

Gustafson, T. (1975). The Controversy Over Peer Review. *Science*, *190*(4219), 1060-1066.

Hambrick, D.C. (2007). The Field of Management's Devotion to Theory: Too Much of a Good Thing? *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*(6), 1346-1352.

Hanson, N.R. (1958). The Logic of Discovery. *Journal of Philosophy*, *55*(25), 1073-1089.

Hargadon, A.B., and Bechky, B.A. (2006). When Collections of Creatives Become Creative Collectives: A Field Study of Problem Solving at Work. *Organization Science*, *17*(4), 484-500.

Harrison, D., and Lee, T. (2002). Obligations and Obfuscations in the Review Process. *The Academy of Management Journal*, *45*(6), 1079-1084.

Herfeld, C. (2024). Model Transfer in Science. In T. Knuuttila, N. Carrillo, and R. Koskinen (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Scientific Modeling* (pp. 270-283). London, UK: Routledge.

Herfeld, C., and Lisciandra, C. (2019). Knowledge transfer and its contexts. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, *77*, 1-10.

Higgs, P.W. (1964). Broken Symmetries and the Masses of Gauge Bosons. *Physical Review Letters*, *13*(16), 508-509.

Hippel, E. v. (1994). "Sticky Information" and the Locus of Problem Solving: Implications for Innovation. *Management Science*, *40*(4), 429-439.

Huff, A.S. (1999). *Writing for Scholarly Publication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Huff, A.S. (2000). 1999 Presidential Address: Changes in Organizational Knowledge Production. *Academy of Management Review*, *25*(2), 288-293.

Humphreys, P. (2019). Knowledge transfer across scientific disciplines. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, *77*, 112-119.

Hwang, K. (2013). Effects of the Language Barrier on Processes and Performance of International Scientific Collaboration, Collaborators' Participation, Organizational Integrity, and Interorganizational Relationships. *Science Communication*, *35*(1), 3-31.

Ilseven, E., Ghosh, S., Kinger-Hans, L., Pape, N., Vo, H.-M., Zhao-Ding, A., Helfat, C.E., Levinthal, D.A., and Szulanski, G. (2024). Exploring the Minds of Visionary Scholars: Evolution in Strategy and Strategy in Evolution. *Strategic Management Review*, forthcoming, 1-45.

Inkpen, A.C., and Tsang, E.W.K. (2005). Social Capital, Networks, and Knowledge Transfer. *Academy of Management Review*, *30*(1), 146-165.

Inkpen, A.C., and Tsang, E.W.K. (2016). Reflections on the 2015 Decade Award—Social Capital, Networks, and Knowledge Transfer: An Emergent Stream of Research. *Academy of Management Review*, *41*(4), 573-588.

Islam, G., Endrissat, N., and Noppeney, C. (2016). Beyond 'the Eye' of the Beholder: Scent innovation through analogical reconfiguration. *Organization Studies*, *37*(6), 769-795.

Jett, Q.R., and George, J.M. (2003). Work Interrupted: A Closer Look at the Role of Interruptions in Organizational Life. *Academy of Management Review*, *28*(3), 494-507.

John, M. (2011). I Really Think You Should Publish this Paper: The Cover Letter to the Editor. *HSR Proceedings in Intensive Care and Cardiovascular Anesthesia*, *3*(2), 137-139.

Joshi, K.D., Sarker, S., and Sarker, S. (2007). Knowledge Transfer Within Information Systems Development Teams: Examining the Role of Knowledge Source Attributes. *Decision Support Systems*, *43*(2), 322-335.

Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., and Tversky, A. (1982). *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Kaplan, A. (1964). *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science*. San Francisco, CA: Chandler Publishing Company.

Kenworthy, T.P., and Verbeke, A. (2015). The Future of Strategic Management Research: Assessing the Quality of Theory Borrowing. *European Management Journal*, *33*(3), 179-190.

Ketokivi, M., and Mahoney, J.T. (2023). *Efficient Organization: A Governance Approach*. Oxford UK: Oxford University Press.

Knorr-Cetina, K.K. (1999). *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Krlev, G., and Spicer, A. (2023). Reining in Reviewer Two: How to Uphold Epistemic Respect in Academia. *Journal of Management Studies*, *60*(6), 1624-1632.

Kuhn, T.S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Labianca, G., and Brass, D.J. (2006). Exploring the Social Ledger: Negative Relationships and Negative Asymmetry in Social Networks in Organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, *31*(3), 596-614.

Lachance, C., and Larivière, V. (2014). On the Citation Lifecycle of Papers with Delayed Recognition. *Journal of Informetrics*, *8*(4), 863-872.

Lakatos, I., and Musgrave, A. (Eds.) (1970). *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lange, D., and Pfarrer, M.D. (2017). Sense and Structure—The Core Building Blocks of an AMR Article. *Academy of Management Review*, *42*(3), 407-416.

Latusek, D., and Hensel, P.G. (2022). Can They Trust Us? The Relevance Debate and the Perceived Trustworthiness of the Management Scholarly Community. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *38*(1), 101193.

Lawrence, T.B., Mauws, M.K., Dyck, B., & Kleysen, R.F. (2005). The Politics of Organizational Learning: Integrating Power into the 4I Framework. *Academy of Management Review*, *30(*1), 180-191.

Lee, C.J., Sugimoto, C.R., Zhang, G., and Cronin, B. (2013). Bias in Peer Review *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *64*(1), 2-17.

Leijonhufvud, A. (1973). Life Among the Econ. *Economic Inquiry*, *11*(3), 327-337.

Leonardi, P.M., and Barley, S.R. (2010). What's Under Construction Here? Social Action, Materiality, and Power in Constructivist Studies of Technology and Organizing. *Academy of Management Annals*, *4*(1), 1-51.

Leone, M.P.V., Mantere, P.S., and Faraj, P.S. (2021). Open Theorizing in Management and Organization Studies. *Academy of Management Review*, *46*(4), 725-749.

Lewin, K., and Cartwright, D. (1951). *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*. New York: Harper.

Lin, C.-H. (2022). Knowledge Transfer, Templates, and the Spillovers. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, *12*(1), 6.

Lingo, E.L., and O'Mahony, S. (2010). Nexus Work: Brokerage on Creative Projects. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *55*(1), 47-81.

Liu, F., Lu, Y., and Wang, P. (2020a). Why Knowledge Sharing in Scientific Research Teams Is Difficult to Sustain: An Interpretation From the Interactive Perspective of Knowledge Hiding Behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*.

Liu, Y., Xu, S., and Zhang, B. (2020b). Thriving at Work: How a Paradox Mindset Influences Innovative Work Behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *56*(3), 347-366.

Locke, E.A. (2007). The Case for Inductive Theory Building. *Journal of Management*, *33*(6), 867-890.

Locke, K., and GoldenBiddle, K. (1997). Constructing Opportunities for Contribution: Structuring Intertextual Coherence and "Problematizing" in Organizational Studies. *Academy of Management Journal*, *40*(5), 1023-1062.

Louis, M.R., and Bartunek, J.M. (1992). Insider/Outsider Research Teams: Collaboration Across Diverse Perspectives. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *1*(2), 101-110.

Luger, J., Raisch, S., and Schimmer, M. (2018). Dynamic Balancing of Exploration and Exploitation: The Contingent Benefits of Ambidexterity. *Organization Science*, *29*(3), 449-470.

Lynham, S.A. (2002). The General Method of Theory-Building Research in Applied Disciplines. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *4*(3), 221-241.

MacIntosh, R., Beech, N., Bartunek, J., Mason, K., Cooke, B., and Denyer, D. (2017). Impact and Management Research: Exploring Relationships between Temporality, Dialogue, Reflexivity and Praxis *British Journal of Management*, *28*(1), 3-13.

Magnifico, A.M. (2010). Writing for Whom? Cognition, Motivation, and a Writer's Audience. *Educational Psychologist*, *45*(3), 167-184.

Mainemelis, C. (2010). Stealing Fire: Creative Deviance in the Evolution of New Ideas. *Academy of Management Review*, *35*(4), 558-578.

Makadok, R., Burton, R., and Barney, J. (2018). A Practical Guide for Making Theory Contributions in Strategic Management. *Strategic Management Journal*, *39*(6), 1530-1545.

Makowski, P.T. (2021). Optimizing Concepts: Conceptual Engineering in the Field of Management. The Case of Routines Research. *Academy of Management Review*, *46*(4), 702–724.

Mannucci, P.V., and Perry-Smith, J.E. (2022). "Who are You Going to Call?" Network Activation in Creative Idea Generation and Elaboration. *Academy of Management Journal*, *65*(4), 1192-1217.

Martinko, M.J., Campbell, C., and Douglas, S.C. (2000). Bias in the Social Science Publication Process: Are There Exceptions? *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, *15*(1), 1-18.

Matthews, K.R.W., Yang, E., Lewis, S.W., Vaidyanathan, B.R., and Gorman, M. (2020). International Scientific Collaborative Activities and Barriers to Them in Eight Societies. *Accountability in Research*, *27*(8), 477-495.

McCloskey, D.N. (1983). The Rhetoric of Economics. *Journal of Economic Literature*, *21*(2), 481-517.

McCloskey, D.N. (1994). *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

McCloskey, D.N. (2000). *Economical Writing*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

McGoey, L. (2012). Strategic Unknowns: Towards a Sociology of Ignorance. *Economy and Society*, *41*(1), 1-16.

Mehta, R., and Zhu, M. (2015). Creating When You Have Less: The Impact of Resource Scarcity on Product Use Creativity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *42*(5), 767-782.

Menon, T., and Pfeffer, J. (2003). Valuing Internal vs. External Knowledge: Explaining the Preference for Outsiders. *Management Science*, *49*(4), 497-513.

Merton, R.K. (1973). *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Miles, J., and Suddaby, R.R. (2012). Where are All the New Management and Organization Theories? *Academy of Management Proceedings*, *2012*(1), 10378.

Mir, R., and Mir, A. (2012). The Colony Writes Back: Organization as an Early Champion of Non-Western Organizational Theory. *Organization*, *20*(1), 91-101.

Miron-Spektor, E., Emich, K.J., Argote, L., and Smith, W.K. (2022). Conceiving Opposites Together: Cultivating Paradoxical Frames and Epistemic Motivation Fosters Team Creativity. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *171*. https://doi.org/ARTN 104153.

Miron-Spektor, E., Ingram, A., Keller, J., Smith, W.K., and Lewis, M.W. (2017). Microfoundations of Organizational Paradox: The Problem is How We Think About the Problem. *Academy of Management Journal*, *61*(1), 26-45.

Moore, W.E., and Tumin, M.M. (1949). Some Social Functions of Ignorance. *American Sociological Review*, *14*(6), 787-795.

Moser, S C., and Ekstrom, J.A. (2010). A Framework to Diagnose Barriers to Climate Change Adaptation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 107*(51), 22026-22031.

Mowery, D.C., Oxley, J.E., and Silverman, B.S. (1996). Strategic Alliances and Interfirm Knowledge Transfer. *Strategic Management Journal*, *17*(S2), 77-91.

Mueller, J.S., Melwani, S., and Goncalo, J.A. (2011). The Bias Against Creativity: Why People Desire but Reject Creative Ideas. *Psychological Science*, *23*(1), 13-17.

Nersessian, N.J. (2008). *Creating Scientific Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Newman, D.A., Harrison, D.A., Carpenter, K.M., and Rariden, S.M. (2016). Construct Mixology: Forming New Management Constructs by Combining Old Ones. *Academy of Management Annals*, *10*(1), 943-995.

Nobarany, S., and Booth, K.S. (2015). Use of politeness strategies in signed open peer review. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *66*(5), 1048-1064.

Nowell, B., and Albrecht, K. (2019). A Reviewer's Guide to Qualitative Rigor. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *29*(2), 348-363.

Okhuysen, G., and Bonardi, J.-P. (2011). The Challenges of Building Theory by Combining Lenses. *Academy of Management Review*, *36*(1), 6-11.

Oswick, C., Fleming, P., and Hanlon, G. (2011). From Borrowing to Blending: Rethinking the Processes of Organizational Theory Building. *Academy of Management Review*, *36*(2), 318-337.

Ozanne, J.L., Davis, B., Murray, J.B., Grier, S., Benmecheddal, A., Downey, H., Ekpo, A.E., Garnier, M., Hietanen, J., Gall-Ely, M.L., Seregina, A., Thomas, K.D., and Veer, E. (2017). Assessing the Societal Impact of Research: The Relational Engagement Approach. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, *36*(1), 1-14.

Palmer, D., Dick, B., and Freiburger, N. (2009). Rigor and Relevance in Organization Studies. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *18*(4), 265-272.

Parkhe, A. (2024). Epistemology of Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap in Strategic Management. *Strategic Management Review*(forthcoming), 1-54.

Peng, P., Lin, X., Ünal, Z E., Lee, K., Namkung, J., Chow, J., and Sales, A. (2020). Examining the Mutual Relations Between Language and Mathematics: A Meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *146*(7), 595-634.

Perry-Smith, J.E., and Mannucci, P.V. (2017). From Creativity to Innovation: The Social Network Drivers of the Four Phases of the Idea Journey. *Academy of Management Review*, *42*(1), 53-79.

Pettigrew, A., and Starkey, K. (2016). The Legitimacy and Impact of Business Schools—Key Issues and a Research Agenda. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *15*(4), 649-664.

Pfeffer, J. (1993). Barriers to the Advance of Organizational Science: Paradigm Development as a Dependent Variable. *Academy of Management Review*, *18*(4), 599-620.

Pfeffer, J. (2014). The Management Theory Morass: Some Modest Proposals. In *New Directions in Management and Organization Theory* (pp. 457-468). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Pfeffer, J., and Fong, C.T. (2004). The Business School 'Business': Some Lessons from the US Experience. *Journal of Management Studies*, *41*(8), 1501-1520.

Phelps, C., Heidl, R., and Wadhwa, A. (2012). Knowledge, Networks, and Knowledge Networks: A Review and Research Agenda. *Journal of Management*, *38*(4), 1115-1166.

Pierce, J.L., Kostova, T., and Dirks, K.T. (2001). Toward a Theory of Psychological Ownership in Organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, *26*(2), 298-310.

Pierce, J.L., Kostova, T., and Dirks, K.T. (2003). The State of Psychological Ownership: Integrating and Extending a Century of Research. *Review of General Psychology*, *7*(1), 84-107.

Podsakoff, P.M., MacKenzie, S.B., and Podsakoff, N.P. (2016). Recommendations for Creating Better Concept Definitions in the Organizational, Behavioral, and Social Sciences. *Organizational Research Methods*, *19*(2), 159-203.

Popper, K.R. (1959). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London, UK: Routledge.

Popper, K.R. (1962). *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge.* London, UK: Routledge.

Reichenbach, H. (1938). *Experience and Prediction: An Analysis of The Foundations And The Structure of Knowledge*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Roederer, M., Marciniak, M.W., O'Connor, S.K., and Eckel, S.F. (2013). An Integrated Approach to Research and Manuscript Development. *American Journal of Health System Pharmacy*, *70*(14), 1211-1218.

Rousseau, D. M. (2006). Is There Such a Thing as "Evidence-Based Management"? *Academy of Management Review*, *31*(2), 256-269.

Sadler-Smith, E. (2008). *Inside Intuition*. London, UK: Routledge.

Sætre, A.S., and Van de Ven, A. (2021). Generating Theory by Abduction. *Academy of Management Review*, *46*(4), 684-701.

Samuelson, J. (2006). The New Rigor: Beyond the Right Answer. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *5*(3), 356-365.

Sargeant, J., Mann, K., Sinclair, D., Van der Vleuten, C., and Metsemakers, J. (2008). Understanding the Influence of Emotions and Reflection Upon Multi-Source Feedback Acceptance and Use. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, *13*(3), 275-288.

Schickore, J. (2022). Scientific Discovery. In U.N. Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Schniederjans, D., Cao, E.S., and Schniederjans, M. (2013). Enhancing financial performance with social media: An impression management perspective. *Decision Support Systems*, *55*(4), 911-918.

Schoemaker, P.J.H. (2024). Integrating Diverse Perspectives in Strategy Studies. *Strategic Management Review,* forthcoming.

Sergeeva, A., and Andreeva, T. (2016). Knowledge Sharing Research: Bringing Context Back In. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *25*(3), 240-261.

Shaffer, J.A., DeGeest, D., and Li, A. (2016). Tackling the Problem of Construct Proliferation: A Guide to Assessing the Discriminant Validity of Conceptually Related Constructs. *Organizational Research Methods*, *19*(1), 80-110.

Shannon, C.E. (1948). A Mathematical Theory of Communication. *The Bell System Technical Journal*, *27*(4), 623-656.

Shannon, C.E., and Weaver, W. (1949). *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Shatz, D. (2004). *Peer Review: A Critical Inquiry*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Shepherd, D.A., and Suddaby, R. (2017). Theory Building: A Review and Integration. *Journal of Management*, *43*(1), 59-86.

Shin, J., and Grant, A.M. (2021). When Putting Work Off Pays Off: The Curvilinear Relationship between Procrastination and Creativity. *Academy of Management Journal*, *64*(3), 772-798.

Simonton, D.K. (2003). Scientific Creativity as Constrained Stochastic Behavior: The Integration of Product, Person, and Process Perspectives. *Psychological Bulletin*, *129*(4), 475-494.

Singh, M.D., and Kant, R. (2008). Knowledge management barriers: An interpretive structural modeling approach. *International Journal of Management Science and Engineering Management*, *3*(2), 141-150.

Stadler, C., Helfat, C.E., and Verona, G. (2022). Transferring Knowledge by Transferring Individuals: Innovative Technology Use and Organizational Performance in Multiunit Firms. *Organization Science*, *33*(1), 253-274.

Stewart, G.L., and Barrick, M.R. (2012). The folly of using research lacking rigor as a call to action. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *11*(2), 278-284.

Stocking, S.H. (1998). On Drawing Attention to Ignorance. *Science Communication*, *20*(1), 165-178.

Suddaby, R.R. (2014). Why Theory? *Academy of Management Review*, *39*(4), 407-411.

Suddaby, R.R. (2010). Construct Clarity in Theories of Management and Organization. *Academy of Management Review*, *35*(3), 346-357.

Sullivan, G.M., Simpson, D., Yarris, L.M., and Artino, A.R. (2019). Writing Author Response Letters That Get Editors to "Yes". *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, *11*(2), 119-123.

Swanson, R.A., and Chermack, T.J. (2013). *Theory Building in Applied Disciplines*. Williston, VT: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Swidler, A., and Arditi, J. (1994). The New Sociology of Knowledge. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *20*(1), 305-329.

Szulanski, G. (1996). Exploring Internal Stickiness: Impediments to the Transfer of Best Practice Within the Firm. *Strategic Management Journal*, *17*(S2), 27-43.

Szulanski, G. (2000). The Process of Knowledge Transfer: A Diachronic Analysis of Stickiness. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *82*(1), 9-27.

Szulanski, G. (2008). *Sticky Knowledge: Barriers to Knowing In The Firm*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Szulanski, G., Cappetta, R., and Jensen, R J. (2004). When and How Trustworthiness Matters: Knowledge Transfer and the Moderating Effect of Causal Ambiguity. *Organization Science*, *15*(5), 600-613.

Szulanski, G., Ringov, D., and Jensen, R. (2014). Up-Hill and Down-Hill Learning: Patterns of Knowledge Transfer Methods and Stickiness. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, *2014*(1), 15252.

Tangaraja, G., Mohd Rasdi, R., Abu Samah, B., and Ismail, M. (2016). Knowledge Sharing is Knowledge Transfer: A Misconception in the Literature. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, *20*(4), 653-670.

Thagard, P. (1997). Coherent and Creative Conceptual Combinations. In *Creative Thought: An Investigation of Conceptual Structures and Processes*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Thatcher, S.M.B. (2021). Intentional Inclusion of Diverse Voices and Global Perspectives at AMR. *Academy of Management Review*, *46*(1), 1-5.

Thatcher, S.M.B., and Fisher, G. (2021). The Nuts and Bolts of Writing a Theory Paper: A Practical Guide to Getting Started. *Academy of Management Review*, *47*(1), 1-8.

Tihanyi, L. (2020). From “That’s Interesting” to “That’s Important”. *Academy of Management Journal*, *63*(2), 329-331.

Tourish, D. (2019). *Management Studies in Crisis: Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Tsai, W., and Ghoshal, S. (1998). Social Capital and Value Creation: The Role of Intrafirm Networks. *Academy of Management Journal*, *41*(4), 464-476.

Tsoukas, H. (2009). A Dialogical Approach to the Creation of New Knowledge in Organizations. *Organization Science*, *20*(6), 941-957.

Umphress, E.E., Rink, F., Muir, C.P., and Hideg, I. (2022). Insights on How We Try to Show Empathy, Respect, and Inclusion in AMJ. *Academy of Management Journal*, *65*(2), 363-370.

Uzzi, B., and Spiro, J. (2005). Collaboration and Creativity: The Small World Problem. *American Journal of Sociology*, *111*(2), 447-504.

Van de Ven, A.H. (2007). *Engaged Scholarship. A Guide for Organizational and Social Research*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Von Hippel, E. (1994). "Sticky Information" and the Locus of Problem Solving: Implications for Innovation. *Management Science*, *40*(4), 429-439.

von Nordenflycht, A. (2023). Clean Up Your Theory! Invest in Theoretical Clarity and Consistency for Higher-Impact Research. *Organization Science*, *34*(5), 1981-1996.

Wacker, J.G. (1998). A Definition of Theory: Research Guidelines for Different Theory-Building Research Methods in Operations Management. *Journal of Operations Management*, *16*(4), 361-385.

Wacker, J.G. (2004). A Theory of Formal Conceptual Definitions: Developing Theory-building Measurement Instruments. *Journal of Operations Management*, *22*(6), 629-650.

Wagner, D.G., and Berger, J. (1985). Do Sociological Theories Grow? *American Journal of Sociology*, *90*(4), 697-728.

Wang, S., and Noe, R.A. (2010). Knowledge Sharing: A Review and Directions for Future Research. *Human Resource Management Review*, *20*(2), 115-131.

Weber, M. (translated by T. Parsons) (1930). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,

Weick, K.E. (1989). Theory Construction as Disciplined Imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, *14*(4), 516-531.

Weick, K.E. (1995). What Theory is Not, Theorizing is. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *40*(3), 385-390.

Whetten, D.A. (1989). What Constitutes a Theoretical Contribution? *Academy of Management Review*, *14*(4), 490-495.

Wong, G. L.-H. (2019). Tips for Responding to Reviewers' Comments - from an Editor's or Reviewer's Points of View. *Gut and Liver*, *13*(1), 7-10.

www.ph.ed.ac.uk. (2014). *Brief History of the Higgs Mechanism*. Retrieved 11.06.2022 from https://www.ph.ed.ac.uk/higgs/brief-history

Yih-Tong Sun, P., and Scott, J. L. (2005). An Investigation of Barriers to Knowledge Transfer. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, *9*(2), 75-90.

Zahra, S.A., and George, G. (2002). Absorptive Capacity: A Review, Reconceptualization, and Extension. *Academy of Management Review*, *27*(2), 185-203.

Figure 1. Iterative relation between stickiness and creativity in theory-building

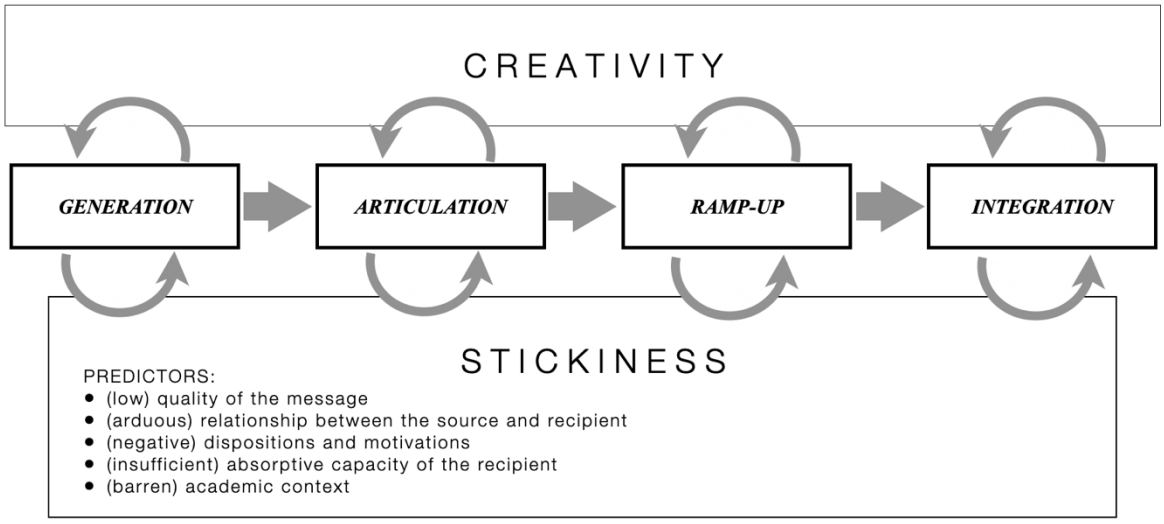

Table 1. Stickiness in the phases of the theory-building process

Theory-building phase	Definition	Stickiness	
		Notable harmful forms	Notable beneficial forms
Theory generation	Theory formation: a well-substantiated explanation and/or prediction of a given phenomenon. During this phase, theoretical ideas are conceived ("conceptualized") and initially structured in scientific terms.	Related mostly to scientific precision and the logic of inquiry: methodological, conceptual.	
		Cognitive fixation on a concept may hide contradictions and the exploration of alternative options (e.g., flawed metaphors)	Rigor-driven abstraction (e.g., facing a logical inconsistency early may push further abstraction and alternative thinking)
Theory articulation	An elaboration of a scientifically framed theoretical contribution in the form of a scholarly standardized theoretical contribution (it should not be confused with theory applications to specific empirical domains).	Mostly related to institutionalized research: socially accepted, but not always explicit standards for a message to be submittable, comprehensive, and comprehensible for social evaluation. Barriers depend on the submission target, but are subjective, as authors infer them based on their readings, experience, and intuition. Also, they depend on the form of the theoretical contribution (differentiated standards).	
		Hostile communication between the source and the recipient; unclear status of certain forms of the message (e.g., grey literature).	Standards of academic writing (e.g., language, style, and academic form); journal submission guidelines for the message.
Theory ramp-up	Peer legitimation and publication of the contribution; it comprises all social/organizational actions and events during which theory builders have a chance to defend, strengthen, and promote their message. It embraces the peer-review process and responses to critical papers, reactions in journals or book reviews (and responses to those reactions and so on).	To varying degrees, related to socially accepted publication norms, the violation of which is related to various forms of critique or rejection of the message. Barriers are multifold, can be inconsistent with one another, and are often emotionally vexing to address. They may depend on the subjective responses of recipients and their understanding of the scientific norms and criteria for relevance. They also hide power games.	
		Paradigm-policing or biased peer reviews (e.g., reviewers fundamentally opposed to an alternative theorizing).	Institutionalized preferences for certain forms of message (e.g., inclusivity in editorials); demands for clarity (e.g., reviewers pushing sources to show the 'black box').
Theory integration	Post-publication activities and events incorporating the message into the accepted body of knowledge. Temporarily very extended phase, the result of which is largely independent from the intentional endeavors of the source.	Refers to the cognitive and social recognition of a scientifically vetted theory. It may share the specificity of barriers during theory ramp-up, but it also is peculiar due to the complexity of knowledge integration: it may vary from the lack of broader awareness of the message, its partial understanding, through its misunderstanding, to intentional omissions (negligence).	
		'Not Invented Here' syndrome (e.g., dismissing outside theories); cultural and political barriers blocking wider reception (e.g., for politically meaningful topics).	Misinterpretations (e.g., developing theories in unforeseen ways); provoking synthesis (e.g., initial strong resistance leads to a community-wide grappling with the ideas of the message)